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ABSTRACT

Working collaboratively can be uncomfortable and bewildering, especially for developmental students. It is common for students to be anxious about their first experience with group work, and often they have a lot of questions about grading, cooperation, and what might happen if the group does not get along. The amount of time and variety of ways instructors spend preparing themselves and their students for group work depends on students' needs and the teaching style of the particular instructor. Some people work well in groups and some do not, and it is useless for a teacher to spend too much time trying to convince students of the virtues of collaborative work. It is far more worthwhile simply to divide them into groups and let them draw their own conclusions. One teacher reported that her students' writing became more coherent and grammatically correct as their group work progressed. A survey about what they thought of collaborative work indicated that among the benefits of working in a group the students perceived were (1) exposure to a variety of ideas, (2) an appreciation of the value of concise writing, and (3) the importance of detail. The success of any collaborative project depends upon the students involved, but judging from what these students reported gaining from working in groups, it is a worthwhile experiment. (Excerpts from students' survey responses are included.) (AEW)

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CS 210 593

READING AND WRITING IN GROUPS: HOW DOES IT WORK AND WHAT ARE GAINS?

Working collaboratively for students, and frequently for professionals, is a complex activity. Often, it is difficult, uncomfortable and bewildering. In many ways, this is particularly true for developmental students who, for any number of reasons, are less likely to be prepared to trust and depend on each other or themselves. Despite all the claims about the "naturalness" and "educational validity" of this way of working, without solid planning and frequent follow-up on the process, groups fall apart and learning fails to take place. Yet, instructors with whom I have worked, and my years in the classroom, have convinced me that despite the planning, thinking and rethinking that collaborative learning requires, it really does deliver all those good things that researchers and practicioners report so frequently in journal articles, and have made a standard feature of college English textbooks.

The first part of my presentation is a report of the findings of the faculty development study group I co-direct at the College of Staten Island (C.U.N.Y.) regarding preparing classes for collaborative learning. It is followed by the results of in-class research I conducted to see how my students saw collaborative learning affecting their writing.

When the Collaborative Learning Study Group started to probe into effective group methods, the issue of preparation soon surfaced. We found that with the first mention of group work, students usually present a myriad of questions and apprehensions about collaborative methods. They ask: What if the group doesn't like me or I don't like the group? How big is the group and how permanent? How will I be graded? What ways can I use a group best? What can I give to a group? What does the instructor have in mind? At the outset, collaborative learning seems like "embarking on a voyage in a vessel of questionable seaworthiness."

Because students come with so many questions, our group found it important to carefully prepare them for group work. Of course, most students are not completely bewildered, since many have been in some kind of group before -- at work, in camp, religious organizations, in clubs, bands or other social situations -- but perhaps not in academic ones. It is useful to open a discussion of these group situations just to see what attitudes students have in general about the dynamics of group work and how they might change in a classroom. Did they have bad or good experiences in group work before? What do they expect to happen in this class? What positive attributes can they bring to the group to promote its growth and success? It may also be true that, with the increased adoption of collaborative methods over the last decade, a number of students have already worked academically in groups. It is important for these students as well to share their experiences with the class.

As we worked with the issue of group preparation, we were reminded of another equally important reason to prepare students for group work slowly and with candor and caution. As instructors, we are often somewhat unsure at the beginning of a semester about using group work and have numerous questions of our own. Will students accept this way of working? Have I prepared myself sufficiently for the many problems that group work creates? What do I want students to gain from working in groups? What do I want them to avoid? How much interruption, interference and control is useful? How do I fit in? By going slowly and carefully with your students, you are also giving yourself time to reflect on their responses and consider how to use collaborative learning in <u>this</u> class with <u>these</u> students.

For instructors who are new to group work, it is especially important to introduce collaborative methods slowly. One simply does not know what to expect, and much depends on how one begins. If you introduce collaborative methods without preparing students to work as productive group members, you run the risk of disastrous results, of making collaborative methods repugnant to yourself and your students, and of criticizing the method instead of your lack of preparation. On the other hand, it seems instructors are much more relaxed about using collaborative methods once they have asked themselves why they are trying these methods, what changes it is likely to produce in them and their students and how it alters the dynamics of the class. At the College of Staten Island, we found preparing ourselves is a first step in preparing our students to work collaboratively.

The amount of time and variety of ways that instructors spend on preparing themselves and their students for group work depends on the needs of the students and the teaching style of the instructor. It often turns out the classes are open to this way of working and have had successful experiences with it in other academic situations. After determining the questions and misconceptions students have about collaborative methods, the instructor can decide what preparatory exercises would be best for students to begin working in a productive group environment. Many instructors have found it pointless to try and convince students of the virtues of group work. It is more useful to have students in groups in some way, and then reflect on their experience, ask questions, discuss their reactions and discover its effectiveness for themselves.

Our study group found there are at least as many ways of preparing students for group work as there are inventive instructors. You will no doubt create some of your own ways or select a way which you come to trust.

But once the groups are working well in writing classes, what changes can students expect to see in their writing? Having used collaborative learning for

a number of years, I became increasingly curious about how students saw themselves and their writing changed by group work,if in fact they saw any changes at all. I needed a clearer picture than the one I had. From my perspective as their teacher, I had noticed an encouraging growth in their writing, but now I needed to hear what they had observed.

I began this study during the Spring 1986 semester when I taught two developmental skills courses. One section worked well in groups, and I used group work often in that class. The other section was particularly restive and worked better when they worked alone or as one large group. I seldom used group work with them. Each class had been assigned journals in which they had to respond in writing to short stories, reporting discussions of the stories in their own words, along with observations of themselves as readers of the story. Initially, each class had difficulty with the assignment, largely because they had had little experience responding in writing to what they read. Yet, after a while it became evident that the students who spent more time in groups were able to write longer, clearer, more detailed entries. When I questioned some members of that class about how they were able to produce these improved entries, I started hearing how the group setting had proved to be a good training grounds for: asking questions, sharing ideas, discovering different ways of perceiving and ordering information. They also found that they had more to say and different ways in which to say it.

In a freshman writing course I teach called "The Short Story and Novella," a course that uses literature as the basis of writing, I researched how group work was affecting student writing. I noticed that these students, many of whom had revolted when they were first assigned weekly journals began to enjoy and master this standing assignment only after they began working in groups. Their early journals had been thin and often confused and unfocused. But shortly after the introduction of group work, they became noticeably fuller, more coherent, and later on still, more grammatically correct. Yet, I could not be sure if group

work was diffusing their reaction to both the assigned reading and writing, and once again I found that I was filled with questions about how working in groups was affecting their writing. What was it like for them to work with other students? Did their reactions to group work change any after they were prepared and after we had paid attention to some of the initial difficulties they reported early in the semester? Was group work empowering them as writers, or did it only seem that way? Which classroom activities were they finding useful? How did they see themselves changing as readers and writers? What specific differences did they notice? What needed my attention to make the groups work better and to help students grow as readers and writers? As the questions continued to grow, I began to plan ways to seek answers from sources beyond simple observation and brief conversation.

For me, it was particularly interesting to think that what researchers are only beginning to discover about improving writing skills through the use of collaborative learning, was probably discovered a long time ago by students who had worked in groups.

Since then I have been systematically collecting and studying my students' reactions to group work at the beginning, middle and end of a semester to learn their impression of how group work is or is not affecting them as writers. To do this I designed several questionnaires and post-exercise feedback questions. At the beginning of the semester, students I surveyed reported that although they, for the most part, welcomed the idea of group work, their initial work in groups proved frustrating as they did not know how to work together. They wrote about how disappointing it was to work with people who either held back ideas, monopolized the conversation, constantly tried to digress, wanted to rush through work, and exhibitied a variety of resistences or uncertainies.

I took their anonymous answers to the question: "What was it like for you to work in a group during the last class?" and prepared a class newsletter. Feed-

back such as this made me aware of how the students were responding to group work while it provided them with self-generated proof that they had certain responsibilites to themselves and to each other when they worked together.

When I read the students mid- and end- of-semester responses about how group work was affecting them as students and as writers, I was struck by many things. To begin with, the writing in the end- of-semester itself demonstrated change as it was more expressive, detailed, better organized and more grammatically correct. The specificity of their responses was the most helpful aspect in trying to determine just how group work benefits writers. The following conclusions of my research include actual excerpts from the students' answers to my questions. They are from the freshman writing course. The most frequent comments they made about the effect group work had on their writing appears below. Their observations concurred with mine. They said group work did the following things:

1) exposed them to a greater variety of ideas.
2) showed them that no one will understand what writers mean if they are not clear.
3) showed them how a paper can suffer from lack of detail.
4) convinced them that talking about what one is writing is an important part of the writing process.
5) helped them see that neither reading nor writing have to be solitary, lonely acts.
6) disarmed them in terms of receiving ideas for revision.
7) showed them a different, more productive way of completing a writing assignment.
8) took something that was difficult to complete and made it more manageable.
9) demonstrated for them the potential value of reworking a piece of writing and not handing in the first draft. [Most students realized that what they

were now calling "the first draft," was what they previously saw as the finished paper.]

10) got them into the habit of reading aloud while editing.

11) taught them how to let go of poor ideas, and how to listen to, accept and incorporate better ones.

12) showed them a way of banding together to get through reading and writing assignments, as well as courses, that they saw as boring and/or difficult.

REPRESENTATIVE EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT RESPONSES

Short Story/Novella Course, Summer 1987

"...I got to see how different people approach writing assignments and I think this will help me in the future as I was one of those people who was never sure about how to complete a writing assignment. Now I know writing goes through many steps and changes."

"...since we have been working in groups, I notice how I use questioning more frequently when reading and writing. It is much easier for me now to come up with ideas and support them without being so stubborn that I refuse to exchange them for better ones..."

"...group work enabled me to let loose while writing. I have always had inhibitions when it came to writing for college classes. I felt that the teacher was totally in charge of the writing assignment that I had to do. Usually until an assignment was collected, I was alone with it. I had sort of a paranoia about writing. Now, even though I recognize I really only enjoy writing that I do for myself, not writing assignments, I am more in command while doing school work."

"...group work helped me in three specific ways: First, I can now speak freely in front of a class, which will hopefully help me when I graduate and begin teaching.

Second, it helped me read better, something I have always been concerned with. Both the use of short stories and group discussion helped me become a more effective, confident reader. Last, writing in groups helped me to write better, to maintain an interest in what I write and to express myself more clearly."

"...group work helped me learn what kind of writing I find tasteful, and what kind I find distasteful. Working with other students on their papers helped me to see the varities of ways students can express themselves. Because of this exposure, my writing has changed, but also I have changed, too. I am less arrogant, less defensive when I do not understand things, and I am more at ease in all my classes. Now I know others feel the way I do--some times shy and embarrassed. Learning how to make myself feel at home made it easier for me to ask questions."

"Group work has helped me overcome my fear of expressing my opinion. For example, I had to write for a Biology class this semester. The teacher in that class made everyone read their work outloud. Because I had learned how work in front of other students in this class, I was able to do so in Biology, without making any nervous mistakes..."

"...group work has affected and changed the skills I need for college by opening my eyes to different ways of reading, listening and interpreting what I read. Now when I read a story or an article, I find myself dissecting it to find the meaning. I ask myself questions about what I have read. I did not do this in the past. The group made me more objective and encouraged me to strive to write clearer. The listening helped.

[The last excerpt includes most comprehensively what all the students were saying.]

"I think working in a group helped in attaining skills I need for college. When I write, I become an insecure person. I worry that my message is not clear and that my writing is generally poor. In a group, I can get reassurance but more

so, the group can help me express myself more clearly. I have become more critical of my own work and no longer just leave that up to the teacher. If other students can not understand the point I am trying to make, I know the teacher will not either. It is beneficial this way, because hopefully my grade will be better in the long run. When we discussed our reading in a group, I was able to grasp the meaning of the story better. Talking as a group opened up new avenues in mine, and I think everyone else's, understanding. If everyone in the group understood at least one point, as a whole, we were usually able to get closer to the meaning of the entire story."

As a post script about eliciting feedback from your students, the best questions to ask are the ones generated from your own experience as a teacher and a learner. I think we all share a curiosity about what is going on in our classes and how our students see themselves changing. And as we and our students continue to grow and experience growth, we should expect that our questions will change, too.